

Field Notes

Asma and Taylor

Field Notes Entry #1: Before the First Conversation

T: Hello, my name is Taylor Hazan, and this is just a really quick test of my...audio recorder that I'm using that Sam Pack has lent to me for this honors project. Umm... I'm a little tired, because I didn't get a ton of sleep last night, but I... feel like... I can handle myself today? I hope? [laughs] I don't know, I'm jinxing myself, I'm also performing a little bit right now. I'm gonna need to get more comfortable with the recorder so that [Asma] will feel comfortable with it, too. Um, I guess the biggest thing is that I'm just trying to figure out what I wanna do today, do I wanna record anything, do we just wanna talk about how she wants to tell her story, maybe we do a little bit of both. Um, I guess the question is, is—I guess the real thing is, is I'm not gonna know what she's ready to do, so it's all going to depend on what *she* wants to do. Um... Which will be really helpful I think—I want to give her agency in this, I want to give her a choice, so, uh, I might do a little bit of quick reflection before I head down to run on just sort of themes and ideas that we could talk about, um... But yeah, I think the chapters of your life would be, would be good... Yeah. I gotta figure out how to ask about it, but that's what I'm thinkin'. All right, test complete.

Field Notes Entry #2: After the Last Official Interview

T: [deep breath] All right. I just left [Asma's] house with a stack of books, and a promise to meet her at a Somalian restaurant again. She...thanked me, and I thanked her, and I have her gift, and I told her about it, and she said she'd rather have it on April 2nd, because she says she wants to come with me and present with me at the Kenyon Showcase, and I think that would be...just incredible. So now, the end is in sight, and now, she and I have an agreement—or some sort of an idea of, of what we're gonna do, how we wanna organize this. And then, she's gonna finish listening to these recordings, tell me what she wants to take out, and tell me what she wants to put in, and, and we're gonna do this. We're gonna do this. I'monna, I'monna do this. It feels real, finally. It feels real. And I know that there's a *lot* of work ahead of me, but I *cannot*...believe...that I've...that I'm doing this. And I don't know if it's gonna be perfect, and I don't know if it's gonna be, the best project Kenyon Anthropology has ever seen, but...It's gonna be a story. And it's gonna be something that [Asma] and I are proud of...my collaborator and I are proud of. And I could not be more excited about that. I could not be more grateful for this opportunity. [pause] For this story. [GPS starts talking, I click off the recorder]

Field Notes Entry #3: Thoughts on “Yeah”

T: There are so many ways...to say, “Yeah.” [pause] I’m transcribing and listening to these interviews—well, listening and transcribing to these interviews [laughing as talking]—*listening* to, and transcribing these interviews...And, I guess on top of the fact that, we very rarely order our words in the correct ways we speak them...The word “yeah” pops up a lot. And it comes from sympathetic listening, from, from what I’ve read in-in feminist theory, you know, ethnography, sort of tips and descriptions, um, the way that two women interact...you really kind of build this connection, and because [Asma]....Because my collaborator is not...super confident in her English, I think I feel more of, that need sort of affirm I understand what she’s saying...But on top of that, the “yeah” really...speaks to more than just...linguistic understanding, I think it speaks to an emotional understanding, and a sympathy and an empathy that comes with it. And so, I’ve written “yeah” *hundreds* of times, and I haven’t even transcribed all these interviews, I’ve transcribed like two and a half maybe, total, um, and sections of the rest...Uh...And those “yeah’s” do everything from saying, like, “Yeah, I...I know what you mean.” To, um... “Yeah, you’re totally right.” “Yeah, that’s a great idea.” To, “Yeah, like, I’m listening to you.” To-to, “Yeah. [pause] I believe in you, and your worry is real, and your...and your *fear* is real and your *joy* is real and the definitions for the words you were giving me, they’re real, too.” Um...That “yeah” says a lot more than...affirming some kind of understanding. [pause] It means a connection between two people. [pause] So yeah. It means a learning. An understanding. Inside the self and between two selves, and...and a shared moment. [pause, clicks recorder off]

Field Notes Entry #4: Inspired by a Quote from Liisa Malkki

T: Malkki talks about...um... “This anonymous corporeality is not necessarily just a feature of mass scenes, it is equally visible in another conventionalized image of refugees: women and children. This sentimentalized, composite figure, at once feminine and maternal, childlike and innocent, is an image that we use to cut across cultural and political difference when our intent is to address the very heart of our humanity.” Um, clearly there is something aspirational here, and something kind of universalizing, but it also does reduce the refugee into this sort of...faceless mass, and...that...need to...just sort of pick this universal woman or child, um, is something that I’m really actively trying to avoid, as someone who is working with a woman who was a lost child and a lost young woman. Um, both of those things. Because...Uh...As soon as you put those two identities together, you paint that picture of a person, and what I’ve realized through this story and what my collaborator has really shared is that, at every single moment in time, she was not this innocent, helpless victim. She had to stand on her own. Um, very much an *empowering* experience from the very beginning, you know she calls herself a “lost girl,” but is also “free,” is also “lucky,” is also “working hard,” is also “a fighter,” is also “challenging” herself. And so...*that* is the other part of humanity that I think is often lost in these narratives *about* refugees. Um, is that humanity and that agency and that action and that empowerment. Um...So, in organizing this story, I want my collaborator and I to really figure out how to...See that hopelessness that she felt, um, alongside...her fighter nature. You know? Her ability to just continue anyway. Um, to find good, to seek good, to make good in her life. They were *both* happening, you know? It wasn’t just one or the other.

Field Notes Entry #5: On Reading My Advisor's Comments on the Transcriptions and Notes

T: [clicking, coughing, receiving texts, a surprised sound] I'm coughing a little. I...just transferred Professor Pack's, um, comments over onto the Word document that I've been using for my transcriptions, and it's really cool to see, not only someone else's perspective of my experience and, you know, the transcriptions and the notes that I have made, but also to sort of...be in a dialogue with someone who, maybe is seeing this story in a similar way as me? Um...I don't know, I'm trying to sound smart, and it's, [scoffing laugh] it's not really working. My brain's a little fried. Um... [pause] But, I'm about to start my Spring Break Spectacular, in which I really just put this thing together. Um...I've been thinking a lot about it over the past couple of months, and now I think it's finally time to sit down and do the work. Um...And I'm *really* excited about it. *Really, really* excited. [pause] This isn't a super eloquent soliloquy, so...Maybe I won't end up using it, but...I don't know, I'm ready to dive in. It's going to be a lot, but it's going to be worth it. I hope. [laughs] I really hope.

Field Notes Entry #6: Thoughts on Language, Grammar, and the Audio Format

T: So I'm continuing work on the arranging of the episodes, and the writing of the transcripts, and I've been reading through the scripts and notes that I've been making, you know, these past couple of months, and I keep running across these moments where...my collaborator asks me about her grammar, and about her English, and apologizes about how she's not able to speak very clearly or very well, and...I think that is one of the *main* reasons that I wanted to do this in the audio format. Because...I've done a previous project before where I transcribed everything, and it was a text—it was a text-based project, and I left in all of the "like's" and the "um's," and I-I simulated the pauses when I could because I felt like—the other woman that I was working with, those pauses and those unsureties were part of who she was? Um...She was simultaneously super confident in herself and her convictions, but...self-conscious about sharing them, I think? And about how other people might see them? So her pauses and her "like's" and her "um's," her sort of stumbling and sort of...creating a story and image of herself were central to her identity, and I think, for my collaborator, it's a similar...idea, right? She...is still learning English, after ten, eleven years in the United States, and...is—I mean, even over this series of interviews, there will be moments where one clip may sound like much better English than another one, because she is *improving* at such a rapid rate now that she's, you know, um, in school and learning to write and read more critically and more analytically, and as well, you know, talking to *me*, I think, having these hours and hours of conversation has probably helped her with her English, and...Listening to *her* speak...really allows a listener to understand that this woman has a control over the English language that *she* doesn't even realize that she has? There's a moment where I basically share with her that I think she's *got* the rudimentary basics of grammar down, she understands most of it. Uh, and she understands how the English language works, but her *mind* is moving *so* quickly, that I think her language, her English, is struggling to keep up, and I think that's where...the difficulties in her, in her language, come. So listening to it, I think, gives the listener and the absorber of this ethnography a better sense of who my collaborator is and how she's communicating. As opposed to just...reading...this language...because it doesn't *read* like she speaks, if that makes sense. Yeah.

Field Notes Entry #7: On the Moment in the IOM Waiting Room

T: I'm thinking about the moment when Asma is sitting in the waiting room of the office of the IOM [International Organization for Migration], waiting to hear...whether she has been accepted as a refugee in the United States. And...I just *cannot fathom*...what that must have felt like. To sit in a room full of people, from *all* over the world, seeking a better life...Families, single men, single women, young people like herself, older people like the grandmother and her special needs son...They're all just sitting there. Waiting for some sort of stamp of approval or denial. [pause] We've all waited at some point in our lives, right? So I can *kind of* fathom what this might feel like...But there's no way to compare with that experience, right? Sitting in that chair, waiting for your future. [recorder clicks off]

Field Notes Entry #8: On the Attempt and All its Imperfections

T: There are hours and hours of recordings, and with every conversation I have with my collaborator, I'm finding more things that I want to talk about. But with the constraints of time, and editing, and...everything, I'm realizing how imperfect and incomplete this project is going to be. [pause] The episodes or clips or whatever I'm calling them that I put up...the sound quality is not great. We're at different locations at different times, there's restaurant sounds, there's children screaming, there's...bad music, there's smoothie blenders [inhales]...And...The editing is not great and that's just the limit of my capabilities as, as a sound editor, as an anthropologist, as a creator of any kind, and...I was aware of these limitations when I came into it, and I think I've had to continually remind myself that this project is worthwhile. My senior seminar in anthropology, we talked *so* many times, we returned to the same point about the fallibility of these theories, and people proving them wrong, and...anthropologists recognizing, you know, the racism and the discrimination and the silencing that has happened in the history of the field. And we just kept asking, like, "What is the point of doing this? If we're just gonna get it wrong, if we're gonna keep hurting people?" And my stubborn, dogged optimism just...time and time again, shouted back, "Because...the beauty of anthropology is that it is *attempting* to understand the way somebody else sees the world. We're-we're not a paradigmatic science, there is not really a right answer in anthropology a lot of the time." And the work that *I'm* doing, the work that *I'm* particularly interested in, is in those stories, and how people share them, and what role anthropologists have in sharing those stories. And it's not gonna be perfect. And it's not gonna be right. And I'm already exerting *so* much agency over her story, so much *more* agency than I want to...[earnestly, so, so earnestly] But the *attempt* is there. I'm *way* out of my league here, but I, I'm working with my collaborator, I'm trying to...help her in her busy life...Find that story and find that narrative in a way that she can share it with the world. And she can feel empowered by it, and her life. And I want...*other* people to be empowered by that story and her life. Because *I'm* so empowered by it all. It's *selfish*. It really is. Maybe anthropology is selfish. But...this experience...this field is meant to try to understand other people...And I'm *trying* to do that. I'm trying *so* hard. [chuckles] So this project won't be perfect, and it's not gonna be clean...But it's an attempt. It's a twenty-two-year-old...amateur anthropologist's attempt...to see a story, to share a story, and to understand a story alongside the person telling it. [pause] It's about two human beings connecting. And producing something that...can not *only* empower both of the collaborators involved, but the people who absorb this knowledge. *That* is what will make this project, and all its imperfections and ugly corners, worth it.

Field Notes #9: She's a Poet...And Other Selfish Ramblings

T: She's a poet. I just can't stop being utterly swept away by some of the things she says. I really can't. And part of it—especially when she's talking about love, or being young, *feels* like it's directed at me, that she is throwing her *soul* at me, telling me what *I* need to hear, and maybe that's selfish, and [laughing as I speak] maybe that's not anthropological, but...There is a connection that comes between two people when you are talking about these really intimate things...And...Looking back through them now, I just...am utterly swept away by that moment, in that library, listening to her...

Field Notes #10: Religion and Implicit Bias

T: Religion is very important in Asma's life. Whenever she confronts stress, be it when she first arrived in Syria and was feeling really alone and out of control in her life, or...in the moments after she arrived to the United States...Or, in the wake of her heartbreak and the *pain*, the physical and emotional pain she was feeling in response to that. When she felt like she was losing herself. When she felt dirty, when she felt messy, she prayed. Religion plays...a *beautiful* role in this woman's life. A *complex* role, don't get me wrong, but a beautiful one, all the same. It gives her a sense of hope and empowerment that...I think someone who isn't Muslim doesn't really see as clearly? Even someone who...is *constantly* reminding themselves that the stereotypes and the ways we see people are not, are not correct, you know? It's those implicit biases, it's those misinformed ideas that we don't even realize we have. Even when you're someone who actively combats those things, those implicit biases. It's stories like Asma's that really help me remember the complexity of a life, and a faith. And a person. Negotiating that faith.